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ABSTRACT

This paper begins with an investigation of the development of information literacy in the United States, including a definition of the concept and discussion of specific competencies entailed in the creation of the information literacy as promulgated by libraries and librarians. Recommendations of the American Library Association are summarized. The philosophy that supports some of the policies surrounding the advocacy of information literacy in the United States is discussed. Roadblocks to information literacy in developing nations (e.g., illiteracy, lack of publishing, lack of recognition of the importance of information, governmental instability, and lack of understanding between cultures) are then examined, with a view toward exploring alternative routes to information literacy. (Contains 13 references.) (MES)

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Global Literacy Initiatives: The United States and Developing Nations

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Changing information technologies are forcing librarians in the developed world to take a new look at the criteria for information literacy in their societies. Here we will investigate some aspects of the development of information literacy in the United States. We will explore the definition of the concept and discover some specific competencies entailed in the creation of the information literati as promulgated by libraries and librarians in the United States. Next we will discuss the philosophy that supports some of the policies surrounding the advocacy of information literacy. We will then look at some of the roadblocks to information literacy in developing nations with a view toward exploring alternative routes to information literacy.

Information Literacy in the United States

The concept of information literacy has been formally articulated in the United States since 1989. It is a barometer of the sea change which has occurred as a result of technological advances in the area of information accessibility. Prior to the advent of computer networks, the MARC record, automated catalogs, article databases, and the Internet, one of the primary purposes of the library was to provide a repository for culture. Shera once stated that the "proper study of the librarian is Man." [1] Although the dissemination of knowledge was a part of the library's mission, it served first and foremost as the protector and assimilator of the knowledge of a culture as it existed in written form. The model has since shifted away from library as repository to library as facilitator. With the rapid development of communications technology we have moved from the age of knowledge of man to the age of information and its retrieval. As part of this process, our efforts to understand ourselves have moved from preservation to literacy.

The often quoted definition of information literacy presented to us by the American Library Association reads:

> To be information literate, a person must be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information…Ultimately, the information literate people are those who have learned how to learn. [2]

There are a great number of assumptions associated with this statement, not the least of which is that there be a repository for the information, and that it be in written form. The American Library Association also echoes the concepts of free information in a capitalist democracy. Information should be timely, should flow freely, should not be subject to governmental control or censorship. The final report clearly states the importance of information literacy for individuals, business, and citizens of the United States.

The recommendations of the final report suggest the following:

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- Reconsideration of the way in which information is organized, accessed, and defined.
- Formation of a Coalition for Information Literacy under the leadership of the American Library Association in cooperation with other agencies.
- Encouragement of research related to the use of information in its current form, as well as demonstration projects relating to information and its usage.
- State and regional bodies involved in the provision of education should take into account the importance of information literacy and provide the means by which all students might become information literate.
- Train educators to become information literate and in doing so become facilitators in the process of learning.
- Promote the themes of literacy, democratic citizenship, and productivity articulated by the White House Conference on Library and Information Services.

In March of 1998, the American Library Association Presidential Committee on Information Literacy issued ***A Progress Report on Information Literacy***. The returns have been quite favorable and progress has been made on all six of the recommendations, although work remains to be done. The recommendation for further progress that speaks to the heart of this paper states, "There needs to be an emphasis on communicating that quality education requires not only investments in technology, but also in programs that empower people to find, evaluate, and use all information effectively." [3] This may be the most important sentence in the report.

Information literacy programs have been appearing on a multitude of college and university campuses throughout the United States. The Coast Guard Academy, the University of Massachusetts, the University of Hawaii at Manoa, and the University of Wisconsin-Parkside each provide us with slightly different versions of the same concepts. [4] Most information programs have several things in common. As rule, they all provide a definition of information literacy similar to that articulated by ALA. They recognize the effects of technology on the delivery of information. They recognize the effects of technology on the amount of information that is being produced. They frequently emphasize evaluation of sources. Most importantly, they tend to describe the means by which information literacy can be achieved. They recognize the glut of information and profess to provide the means by which individuals can process what they need from it.

The Philosophy of Information Literacy in the United States

The greatest single impetus underlying the encouragement of information literacy in the United States is to provide an informed electorate. The movement to ensure information access to every citizen of the United States has long been the mainstay of libraries and their development, both public and private. The United States supports a federal depository library program which requires easy and common access to the collection as many hours as the library housing it is open. The United States subscribes to the concept that information is power, and that it is important in government and business as well as a form of personal edification. Information literacy, as a factor of lifelong learning, is seen as a civil right by most , and as a civic responsibility by many.

Why should the philosophy behind the provision of library service and the development of information literacy in the United States be of any interest to the developing nation? If information literacy, easy and open access to information, and lack of content control over information systems is part and parcel of democracy as it is practiced in the United States, it colors the expectations the policy makers have for those for whom they wish to provide development assistance. Consider the implications of Halperin's statement, "States that are constitutional democracies are less likely to go to war with the United States or other democracies, and are more likely to support limits on weapons trade, encourage peaceful resolution of disputes, and foster free trade." [5] It is the coordination of cosmopolitan and communitarian philosophies that drives foreign policy in the United States, as well as the hegemonic position it currently enjoys in the international arena. On one hand we look at ourselves and the riches we enjoy and expect others to want the same things. On the other hand, we look at ourselves and the riches we enjoy and want to protect ourselves against others who want the same thing.

Jean Baudrillard may take the concept to the extreme in his criticism of the developed nations as a whole

when he states, "We are the consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own efforts to alleviate it...." [6] However, the West and the United States in particular has often failed to recognize cultural difference, sometimes with quite fatal results. When Baudrillard indicates that the vast glut of information is causing history to become a simulation of itself, he comes much closer to articulating the problems we are facing in the developed world, and the uncomfortable position in which we put ourselves in when we think these problems are universal.

The development of technology is clearly closely tied to the national psyche of the United States. Democracy has been considered a progressive form of government. Combine that with a dedication to capitalism, and technology becomes a driving force in our economy. We need improvements, progress, substitutability, and obsolescence to remain economically healthy. Technology has become part of us and we are at risk of having technique become part of us as well. By this we mean the technique articulated by Ellul and others that assumes there is only one way that things can be done. [7] It is the dehumanization of tasks, and the assumptions that follow.

Consider that we move from protocol to paradigm to technique to technique. We begin with simple rules that become absolutes governing much of what we do, see, feel, hear, and write; rules that govern our society and culture built not around human differences, but around the dehumanized and mechanical. These are the pitfalls we encounter as we try to make our view of information literacy fit the needs of developing countries whether our motivation be enlightened self-interest, democratic zeal, or post-colonial guilt.

Roadblocks to Transferable Initiatives

The information literacy initiatives taken by the United States can provide a framework for viewing the problems encountered in developing countries in the area of information studies. The driving force behind literacy initiatives is the management and understanding of the information explosion. If the glut of information did not exist, we would not have the problem of sifting through it. If all of our academic users were dedicated researchers, we wouldn't need to emphasize user instruction. If all systems were intuitive, we wouldn't need to understand the differences between them.

Before looking at the differences underlying literacy initiatives between the United States and the developing world, lets look at one striking similarity:

> ...students lack the qualities of independence, of self-direction and even of simple curiosity in their attitudes to learning. These spoon-fed, uncritical and, as a result, mentally lethargic students are not prepared for learning, let alone a lifetime of it. [8]

This was written by Behrens in referring to South African students, and it is probably cold comfort that the same statement might be applied to many students in the United States. It is easier to take what you are given, much more difficult to seek it out yourself, process it, and have it become part of your self. Here, at least, the problem of the individual's ability to "recognize when information is needed" is a shared problem. Our differences lie in the degree to which this indifference affects our societies.

A problem shared by many developing countries in promoting information literacy programs is simply the illiteracy rate in the nations. The estimated illiteracy rate in the United States is .5 percent. According to UNESCO figures, Uganda had an illiteracy rate of 43.9 percent in 1991, Mexico had a rate of 12.4 percent in 1990, and Brazil posted a rate of 20.1 percent in 1991. [9] The problem of illiteracy is a recurrent topic in the writings of Peter September, Maurice Lundu and Godfrey Mbewe, and others. [10] The imposition of a foreign language such as English on a culture with strong oral traditions simply compounds the problems facing advocates of information literacy in developing nations.

Another problem facing the developing nations is in the area of publishing. The United States produced 48,146 new titles in 1991 compared to 717 titles in Ecuador, 21 titles in Gambia, and 494 new titles in Algeria according to UNESCO figures. [11] Why is publishing important in the context of information literacy programs? The lack of a thriving publishing industry reduces the assets available for information

professionals to lobby governments for support of the programs. There is simply no vested interest that is recognizable by those in power. In a related matter, governments in developing countries often do not recognize the importance of information as a resource.

Illiteracy, lack of publishing, lack of recognition of the importance of information and information professionals, and governmental instability are more tangible than the final roadblock to adoption of information literacy initiatives. The lack of understanding between cultures is probably the greatest problem and this is often aggravated by the lack of understanding of one's own culture. We currently digitize maps, documents and other items for later use. Yet we emphasize the written word in almost all of the writing we do concerning information literacy.

The graphically oriented aspects of technology should be used to the library's advantage in meeting with the oral traditions of many societies within developing nations. Does everything that is meaningful only exist in written form? In turning to preservation, we also increase the ability to access a diverse collection of information. Technology is moving a literate culture to a graphically oriented culture. The oral cultures of many developing nations could find technology helpful in moving from a non-literate culture to a culture better able to compete in the literate world. Conclusion and suggestions for further study

Ultimately, the whole cloth of the literacy initiatives developed in the United States cannot become a pattern for global initiatives as they exist today. There are simply too many areas in which the developing country does not match the pattern articulated by the United States whether it is literacy, academic status for librarians, oral traditions or governmental support. This should not necessarily be cause for alarm, however. It should be cause for celebration in many cases. The problems that developing nations encounter in attempting to apply the United States model can be turned to their advantage. Fayose is right on target,

> Library educators and practitioners must make serious efforts to decolonize their brains of the British and American legacy of librarianship and evolve their own philosophy. [12]

In doing so, they can avoid the surrender to technique and the concept that things can only be done correctly in one way.

Much work needs to be done to tailor a useful system for information delivery and the skills needed to deal with information in the developing world. Veronica Jacobs discusses many possibilities and emphasizes, "Users should be given the opportunity to choose how they want to learn, whether through observing nature, listening to and speaking with village elders, studying books and journals, using mass media or surfing the web." [13] The developing nation has resources that have been lost to many developed societies. Take advantage of these resources and use the technology being developed for others to your own advantage. You will be pressured to develop information literacy initiatives through many avenues. Adapting initiatives to fit your culture is one way to remain relevant during the information revolution and at the same time retain that which is unique.

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